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THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

College of Law



Honours Dissertation

ABBOT TORRES AND THE COMPLEX CANONICAL

STATUS OF NEW NORCIA

1902-1914

Maria Teresa Avalos

This Thesis is presented as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts, Honours in History

College of Law
The University of Notre Dame
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Declaration

This Thesis is my own work and no part of it has been submitted for a degree at this, or any other University. Due acknowledgment is made to the work of others used in this thesis.


Maria Teresa Avalos

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complex issues of abbatial authority and the canonical status of an abbey in Western Australia. The abbey was founded in 1846 in the Victoria Plains of Western Australia by two Spanish Benedictines, Dom Rosendo Salvado and Dom Joseph Serra, and they called it New Norcia. In September 1900 Bishop Salvado incorporated the New Norcia Monastery into the Spanish Province of the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance. Bishop Salvado died that very year, but before his death he secured New Norcia's next Abbot, Dom Fulgentius Torres. Torres' period as abbot of New Norcia started in 1902 and came to a sudden end when he died in 1914. In this short period Abbot Torres embarked on an ambitious building programme and by the time of his death he appeared to have been a highly successful abbot. However, in 1906 Torres had attempted to resign. This Thesis explores hitherto unexamined documents which shed light on the reasons for his resignation attempt. It is this dissertation's position that it was the problems caused by the complex canonical status of New Norcia, undefined abbatial authority and conflicts with Provincial Superiors that influenced Abbot Torres's decision to resign in 1906 and later in 1908.



Abbot Fulgentius Torres
Second Abbot of New Norcia
Founder of Drysdale River Mission
Source: The Diary of Bishop Torres

TABLE OF CONTENTS	page No
Acknowledgments	2
Abbreviations	2
List of Illustrations	3
Definitions	4
Chronology	5
<hr/>	
Introduction	6
Chapter I The Benedictine Foundations of the Australian Catholic Church	11
Chapter II Intricate Canonical Status of New Norcia and Undefined Abbatial Authority	25
Chapter III An Unsuccessful Resignation	39
Chapter IV Business in Rome	44
Conclusion	47
Bibliography	49

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Mrs Alison Thompson - translator

Mr Joshua

The Avalos Family- My parents Rene and Maria Teresa, My brothers, sister and nephews

Abbreviations

SCPF: Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, also known as Propaganda Fide

CCPO: Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance (Benedictine parent house)

SPCCPO: Spanish Province of the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance.

BCNN: Benedictine Community of New Norcia

Definitions

Abbot General of the CCPO: this congregation consists of several monasteries in which the same regular observance is followed. These follow the same observance to promote the general interest of the order. The role of the abbot general is to take precedence of all other abbots, he is empowered to pronounce on all matters of discipline, to settle disputes arising between monasteries, to hold canonical visitation, to exercise general supervision for the regular observance of monastic discipline. He resides in Rome he has the ultimate say in all matters regarding the extraordinary government of the monasteries incorporated in his congregation.

Abbot Visitor: this office developed gradually over the centuries out of the system of visitation introduced to make sure that all local ordinaries were governing their respective dioceses in accordance with the law and doctrine of the Catholic Church. The Benedictine Congregation adopted this practice and adapted it to suit its monastic needs. The Abbot General of the Order appointed an Abbot Visitor to visit and supervise the government of the monasteries within his congregation and the provinces within it as well. The Spanish Visiting Abbot might be a regular abbot himself who was chosen or the abbot general of the Spanish Province.

General Chapters: In the Benedictine Order, each congregation has its own separate chapter, which is composed usually of the abbot and an elected delegate from each monastery with the president of the congregation at their head. The general chapter usually deals with the elections of superiors and officials. It settles matters of business and discipline, it hears appeals from its subjects and can draw up or sanctions changes to the constitution of the order. It represents the highest authority in the congregation.

Provincial Chapter: Gathering of superiors and officials of a province of the Benedictine Congregation. The matters treated are concerning the province, its monasteries and its officials. Sometimes, agreements reached in these provincial chapters may not need approval of general chapters, but they generally need to be submitted for approval. A **Provincial officer** acts under the superior of a religious order, he exercises general supervision over all local superiors in the province. The province is generally identified geographically and it may consist of one or more countries. The provincial is elected for a period of 3 to 6 years, he has authority to appoint confessors, call provincial chapters, preside over its deliberations and he takes care that the orders of the General Chapters and the Superior General are properly carried out. His provincia duty is to make regular visitations of the abbeys in his province in the name of the general and report on the religious and administrative state of the abbeys.

List of illustrations**page No**

1	Status of New Norcia in 1851	23
2	New Norcia in 1859	23
3	New Norcia in 1864	24
4	New Norcia in 1867	24
5	New Norcia in 1900	27
6	Abbot Torres' Proposal in 1910	38

NEW NORCIA- A Chronology

- 1844 Dom J. B. Serra and Dom R. Salvado exiled from their monastery of St. Martin at Compostela by the 1835 religious persecution. They went to Rome to the Propaganda Fide Congregation and expressed their desire to dedicate themselves to missionary life.
- 1845 Fr John Brady consecrated First Bishop of Perth on May 18th in Rome. Now a Bishop he set out to seek missionaries to sail with him to Western Australia. Propaganda assigned Dom Serra and Bishop Salvado to follow Bishop Brady.
- 1846 Bishop Brady and his 28 missionaries arrived in Fremantle.
Bishop Brady decided to establish three missions for the aboriginal peoples: Northern in Port Victoria (Now Darwin), Southern in Albany and Central Mission in Victoria Plains, 82 miles north of Perth.
New Norcia founded by Dom Salvado.
- 1847 A Monastery is built- a stone structure approximately 14 foot high. Dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity and called New Norcia in memory of the birthplace of St. Benedict in Italy.
- 1849 Dom R. Salvado consecrated Bishop.
- 1859 1st of April New Norcia was declared a Benedictine Monastery and Bishop Salvado was named its Apostolic Administrator.
- 1867 28th January, Bishop Salvado appointed Abbot for life and the New Norcia Abbey was raised to rank of Abbey Nullius Diocese with a territory of 16 square miles.
- 1899 Abbot Salvado goes to Europe with the intention of bringing his foundation into line with Canonical requirements by having New Norcia united to the Subiaco Congregation (The Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance under the division of the Spanish Province)
Sudden death of his expected successor- The Very Rev. Fr. Fulgentius Dominguez on April 14 moved him to act immediately to secure his successor.
- 1900 Bishop Salvado died on the 29th of December.

Abbot Fulgentius Torres

- 1861 Born on June 24th at Ibiza, Balearic Islands, Spain.
- 1880 Enters the Episcopal Seminary of Vich, Barcelona.
- 1885 He takes the Benedictine Habit on June 8th, receives religious name of Fulgentius.
Meets Salvado in Spain at Montserrat.
- 1886 He takes simple vows on June 21st.
- 1887 Ordained priest on June 5th.
- 1889 13th July takes final vows, remains in Montserrat for six years.
- 1895 He is sent to open new mission in the Philippines.
- 1897 He is called back to Montserrat.
- 1898 He is appointed Rector of the Montserrat Church in Naples.
- 1900 He meets with Bishop Rosendo Salvado, who asks him to become his successor at New Norcia, Western Australia.
- 1901 15th June, Pope Leo XIII nominates the Very Rev. Fulgentius Torres Administrator Apostolic of New Norcia Mission. He arrives in New Norcia on the 10th of April.
- 1902 He is elected Abbot on the 2nd of October.
Goes to Rome to receive Abbatial Blessing.

Activities of Bishop Torres at New Norcia:

- 1901-3 Frontage and third storey added to the north wing of the monastery.
- 1903 Balconies, verandahs and staircases remodelled; erection of central portion of the monastery; reading room, workshops. All buildings roofed with iron.
- 1904-6 Building of St. Gertrude's ladies college, which officially opened in 1908.
- 1905 Third Plenary Council in Sydney under presidency of Cardinal Moran entreated Abbot Torres to undertake the foundation of mission for the aboriginal peoples in North Western Australia.
- 1906 Torres's Journey of exploration of North West coast of Western Australia
- 1907-8 Erection of new campanile façade to the church, new altars for the church and a new chapel for the monastery.
- 1908 He founded the Drysdale Mission in the far north of Western Australia.
- 1909 St. Joseph's Orphanage for aboriginal girls.
- 1910 Drysdale Mission was canonically approved by the Apostolic See on the 4th of May.
- 1911-3 Erection of St. Ildephonsus' College for boys.
- 1913 St. Mary's new Orphanage for aboriginal boys, and the whole of the monastery library was remodelled.
- 1914 Bishop Torres died on the 5th of October.

INTRODUCTION

New Norcia, 132 kilometres north of Perth, is unique in Australia; it is a town wholly owned by monks. Benedictine monks established a monastery here in 1846 and the town is now one of the most valuable elements of the National Estate.

(David Hutchinson)

New Norcia's history expands over a period of 133 years, seven abbots have governed the monastery and this Benedictine Foundation has had to adapt to circumstances of time and place to ensure its existence and development. Generally, the average person associates New Norcia with its Spanish founder, Bishop Rosendo Salvado and his monks; with the evangelization of aboriginal people, successful farming settlement and beautiful architecture. All these are true and they have become part of the romanticised narrative of New Norcia's history. However, there is so much of New Norcia's history after Abbot Salvado that has not been researched and examined thoroughly. There are fundamental issues that need to be studied and that can provide a fuller and more thematic approach to the history of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.

This thesis will examine and discuss the difficulties and limitations that Dom Fulgentius Torres encountered by assuming the office of Abbot Nullius of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia in Western Australia.¹ These difficulties and limitations included the problems caused by distance and unreliable communication. However, the most serious source of problems for the BCNN had its origin in the complex canonical status of the Abbey of New Norcia. The Abbot's authority was limited by a network of superiors and organizations to which he had to give account of New Norcia's progress and rely on to solve its problems. It is the aim of this thesis to discuss these issues and assess their importance in relation to the development of a Benedictine monastic and missionary community in a foreign country. This thesis is one more example of the characteristic conflicts of authority and interests that have been the subject of contemporary religious historical studies.

¹ Note that from this point the Benedictine Community of New Norcia will be referred to as BCNN or New Norcia.

Abbot Torres arrived in April of 1901 and stayed in New Norcia until his sudden death in October 1914. The story of how Torres became New Norcia's abbot is remarkable; Bishop Salvado was in Rome at the end of 1900 when he fell sick. He realised that he had to define who his successor should be and, given that Dom Fulgentius Dominguez² died back home in New Norcia, he decided that there could be no one better than Dom Fulgentius Torres. Abbot Torres inherited the monastic and missionary New Norcia and its complex status. This created problems which, according to Abbot Torres' and his community's opinion, could have been prevented from reaching an importunate dimension; and which Torres had then to solve in order to guarantee his community's future. He took this matter to heart to such an extent that, after five years of governing the community, he felt unable to cope with the problems and he expressed his desire to resign his office.

His failed attempt to resign from his duties of abbot needs to be discussed. It is obvious that the conflicts resulting from his and his community's unnecessary dependency on the authority of Provincial Superiors, particularly that of the Abbot Visitor of the Spanish Province, pressured him to seek a way out of such distressing position. It is interesting to see how notwithstanding these problems, he was achieving considerable success in giving New Norcia a new direction; he was earning the respect and esteem of those around him and he was working on the consolidation of the work of his predecessor.

Chapter one will concentrate firstly on tracing the development of Benedictine Monasticism until its present Congregational System of Government. This discussion will be placed in the context of St Benedict's Rule; specifically its statements regarding the role of the abbot, the government of monasteries and the system of Visitation. Secondly, the chapter will discuss New Norcia's relationship with the Cassinese Congregation and later the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance,³ the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith⁴ and its ecclesiastical status within the Australian and Western Australian Church Hierarchy. Thirdly, a look at New Norcia's foundation and development under its founder, Dom

² Dom Fulgentius Dominguez had been in New Norcia for quite sometime. Abbot Salvado considered him the best person to take his place; Salvado instructed him in the government of New Norcia and had many times left him in charge of the mission. He was Prior of New Norcia but died soon after Salvado left New Norcia for Rome in 1899.

³ Note the abbreviated form of the Congregation's name: CCPO.

⁴ Note Abbreviated form of the institution: SCPF or also referred to as Propaganda or Propaganda Fide.

Rosendo Salvado, will prove most pertinent here for an understanding of the subsequent development of New Norcia under Abbot Torres.

Chapter Two will be dedicated to an analysis of the primary sources that reveal the impracticality of the arrangements established to secure the canonical union of New Norcia with the Spanish Province of the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance.⁵ Chapter three will discuss Abbot Torres' resignation and its relation to the problematic status of New Norcia. This chapter will attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the intricate canonical status of the monastery placed a severe strain on Torres' office and how this created conflicts between him and superiors of the Spanish Province. Chapter four will discuss the outcome of Abbot Torres' struggle to resolve these problems.

Most of the secondary historical works that have dealt with the history and continual significance of New Norcia have centred around the salient figure of Dom Rosendo Salvado and his period as abbot from 1846-1900.⁶ More recent works such as *A Town Like No Other* edited by David Hutchison; *Kalumburu: The Benedictine Mission and the Aborigines 1908-1975* by Dom Eugene Perez and other publications by the Benedictine Community of New Norcia have attempted to cover the period of Bishop Torres, but do so quite briefly and their importance is discussed separately below.

There are several unpublished historical essays which committed a significant number of pages to a narrative of the Torres' period. These are: T. Beckett, *New Norcia- Its History and Development 1846-1966*; Sr M. Angelina, *Historical Outline of New Norcia Mission*; K. R. Wilson, *The Foundation and Development of the Drysdale River Mission*; Helga J. Eggleston, *A History of the Drysdale River Mission*; Raymond Francis, *Mirror for Man: A History of the Drysdale River Mission from*

⁵ Note Abbreviated forms: SPCCPO or Spanish Province.

⁶ The most prominent examples are: John T. McMahon, *Bishop Salvado: Founder of New Norcia* (Western Australia Patersons Printing Press Ltd; Perth, 1943), Eugene Perez, *Dom Salvado's New Norcia 1846-1900: An Account of his Mission in Western Australia*. No publication details; George Russo, *Lord Abbot of the Wilderness: The Life and Times of Bishop Salvado* (The Polding Press; Melbourne, 1980); *Rosendo Salvado. The Salvado Memoirs*. E. J. Stormon (ed, trns) (University of Western Australia Press; Nedlands, 1977); Norbert Henry Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia* Vol. II (Herbert & Daniel; London, 1911); D. F. Bourke, *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia* (Vanguard Service Print; Perth, 1979); Cardinal Francis Patrick Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia* Vol. II (Frank Coffee & Company; Sydney, 1896); *The Story of New Norcia: The West Australian Benedictine Mission*, 1st Edition, May 1970, revised edition May 1973 (Imperial Printing Company, Western Australia); *New Norcia: Historical Guide to all its Institutions*. Compiled and illustrated by Monachus (The Benedictine Abbey, New Norcia, Western Australia, 1936)

1908 to 1939 and Jennifer Ward, *A History of the Drysdale River Mission*. These are characterised by a narrative approach of the subject matter and by the lack of usage of written primary sources. However, the authors did use Oral information as a primary source. They all dedicated a chapter to a narrative of Abbot Torres' involvement in the exploration and foundation of the Drysdale River Mission.

However, no comprehensive historical research has been conducted to produce a proper history of New Norcia under Bishop Torres. So far, no one has produced such history by going to the written primary sources available at the Benedictine Archives of New Norcia. Except for Father James Flood's book *Tribute of an Irish Secular Priest*, a contemporary of Torres and whose book attempted to include the contribution of Abbot Torres in a history of New Norcia. A significant attempt was made by Dom Eugene Perez, who was the translator of the *Diary of Bishop Torres*, the author of the books mentioned above and he also wrote *Twentieth Century New Norcia 1900- 1960*, a piece not intended for publication. It is probably the best account of Abbot Torres' influence and contribution to the development of New Norcia and the only work in which the problems caused by the canonical status of New Norcia are briefly mentioned. Besides Dom Perez, other monks of New Norcia wrote about the important contribution of Abbot Torres to the progress of their community. For example, Dom Eladio Rios⁷ and Fr Roberto Bas.⁸

The Benedictine Archives for this particular period include most of Abbot Torres' correspondence in Catalan, Spanish, Italian, English and official Church documents written in Latin.⁹ Documents of a more personal type like diary entries and others like business documents have helped put together a picture of the activities and enterprises of the community. The Monastery's Chronicle is useful in giving a sense

⁷ Eladio Rios, *Historical Account of St Ildephonsus' College in the Mission- Monastery of New Norcia in Australia*, New Norcia, 1959. Abbot Torres was the designer of the plans for the school and the founder; the account concentrates on his direct involvement in the building progress and his love for the school.

⁸ Roberto Bas, Prior of New Norcia in Abbot Torres's time, he wrote an article for the *Ecos Magazine* published by the Benedictine Foundation in Manila, Philippines. No other details of publication or year of writing are provided. His article was a description of the works of art of New Norcia, the works of Father Lesmes. Father Bas emphasises the direct involvement and interest of Abbot Torres in this aspect.

⁹ Benedictine Archives, New Norcia, WA. Abbot Torres held correspondence with influential Benedictines from Spain- Abbot Jose Deas of the Monastery of Montserrat, with Abbot General of the CCPO, Italy Mauro Serafini and D. Antonio Ma Marcet and influential clergymen from within Australia.

of the community's way of life and is a valuable source for verification of information obtained from other major sources.¹⁰

The documents that have given life to this thesis, and the ones that reveal the Abbot's urgent preoccupation with the canonical status of the BCNN, are his Official Report to the SCPF of 1910;¹¹ eleven letters to Abbot Jose Deas of the Monastery of Montserrat; one letter in Italian by Mauro Serafini, the Abbot General of the CCPO; one letter and an official document regarding his resignation by Abbot Antonio Marcet of the SPCCPO, and the English Translation of the Diary of Bishop Torres.

The Report to SCPF was written by Abbot Torres in 1910 and presented to Propaganda the same year. He wrote the report in Latin and in it he discussed the most urgent issues concerning the New Norcia Community; the problematic canonical status of the abbey and the limitations this placed upon the abbot. The letters to Abbot Jose Deas, although some were written prior to the presentation of the report to SCPF, are illustrative of the problems discussed in it. The letter by Abbot General Mauro Serafini and the documents by Abbot Antonio Maria Marcet are the only existing evidence of his proposed resignation. Unfortunately, there is no copy available in the Benedictine Archives of the letter or official document by Abbot Torres in which he presented his resignation. Finally, the English translation of *The Diary of Bishop Torres*, in particular the entries for 1910 (Business in Rome), are of great value because they reveal the outcome of his battle to resolve the problems caused by the nominal union of the abbey to the SCCPO.

It is the goal of this thesis to discuss thoroughly the fundamental elements of this intricate aspect of the history of New Norcia. All in order to understand their magnitude and their impact on the ability of Abbot Fulgentius Torres to govern the Benedictine Community of New Norcia for twelve years.

¹⁰ *Chronicle or brief Diary of the most notable events that have taken place in the Benedictine Mission of New Norcia from 1901 to 1914.* Several brothers contributed to the writing and keeping of the Chronicle; Torres was the chronicler for a few months in 1910.

¹¹ The original was written in Latin, it was translated into English by Mrs. Alison Thompson in 1999. The presentation of a report of this nature was a practice carried out for centuries. Diocesan bishops and ordinaries had to send a report to Rome every five years on the state of the church in their respective circumscriptions.